

# ETHICS AND THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS : A REVIEW ESSAY <sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

The main purpose of this essay is to review Peter Jarvis' book on Ethics and education for adults in a late modern society published by the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (England and Wales) (NIACE) in 1997. The essay begins by discussing the aims of the book and comparing it with the only other published book on ethics and adult education. It then outlines the existentialist approach adopted by Jarvis before moving on to discuss the strengths and limitations of this approach and of the book in general. The essay endorses the central thesis of the book which is that the heart of ethical action lies in relationships, in being concerned for the Other and in caring for the Other as a whole person. However the essay then goes on to argue that the book is too preoccupied with personal and professional issues to pay sufficient attention to many of the urgent ethical issues, both global and local, that are facing us to-day.

## **Introduction**

Last year the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (England and Wales) (NIACE) published a book on Ethics and education for adults in a late modern society . The author is Peter Jarvis, Professor of Continuing Education at the University of Surrey in England and Adjunct Professor of Adult Education at the

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<sup>1</sup> *New Zealand Journal of Adult Learning*, v26 no2, October 1998: 74-83.

University of Georgia in the USA. He is also one of the most prolific writers in the field of adult education with at least five books and any number of articles and edited books to his name.

The main purpose of this essay is to review this book. It begins by discussing the aims of the book and comparing it with the only other published book on ethics and adult education. It then briefly outlines the existentialist approach to ethics adopted by Jarvis before moving on to discuss the strengths and limitations of this approach and of the book in general. The essay then concludes by considering some of the questions and issues arising out of the review.

#### Purposes and comparisons

Although Peter Jarvis does not make explicit his aims in writing this book, they become apparent through an analysis of his argument. In the Introduction he claims that the social values associated with modernity and the Enlightenment are being widely challenged in society and that education for adults is becoming '... more instrumental and a market commodity' (p. 1). Within this context he advocates a philosophical position which seeks to recognise difference - the existence of a wide diversity of social and cultural values and moral principles, while at the same time arguing for the recognition of one universal moral value or principle – a principle embodied in human relationships and a 'concern for the Other'. His purpose in writing this book, it would seem, is to encourage those engaged in the education of adults to reflect on their ethical beliefs and practices in the hope that they will be persuaded to accept an existentialist position.

In developing his argument the writer makes very little use of the mainstream literature on adult learning and education. He points out, however, that he is writing the book, not as a professional philosopher, but rather as an educationalist who nevertheless makes use of philosophical knowledge. He therefore draws extensively on the writings of a wide range of philosophers, sociologists and others. The book therefore may be viewed as an interpretative work which seeks to inform educators of some of the thinking contained in this wider body of literature and to examine some of its implications for various aspects of educational practice. In addition to scene-setting chapters on 'Education and educational knowledge', 'The nature of ethics', and 'An existentialist position', chapters are devoted to the following topics: 'Learning to be a moral agent', 'Power and personhood in teaching'; 'Mentoring'; 'Self-directed and contract learning'; 'Distance education'; 'Learning and the market place of knowledge'; 'Assessing students' work and evaluating curricula'; 'The education of adults as a social movement'; and 'The learning society and the education of desire'. Several chapters have been published previously. However much of the work is new.

In relation to purpose and content, as well as in many other ways, Peter Jarvis' work contrasts sharply with the only other book on ethics and adult education of which I am aware. This latter book, edited by Ralph Brockett and published ten years ago by Teachers College Press, Columbia University in New York under the title, *Ethical issues in adult education*, consists of thirteen essays mostly by North American academics. It may be seen as playing a part in the project to promote the professionalisation of adult education in North America. Its intended audience consisted of adult education practitioners, graduate students and professors of adult

education. Chapters address such topics as the following: 'Facilitating ethical development'; 'Ethical issues in programme planning'; 'Marketing for adult education – some ethical issues'; 'Dilemmas in continuing education administration'; 'Ethical dilemmas in evaluating adult education programmes'; 'Ethical dilemmas in teaching adults'; 'Educational advising and brokering – the ethics of choice'; 'Ethics in adult education research'; and 'Translating personal values and philosophy into practical action'.

Aside from chapters by Phyllis Cunningham (on 'The adult educator and social responsibility') and Robert Carlson (on 'A code of ethics for adult educators?') which adopt a critical perspective on the professionalisation of adult education, the book as a whole has a pragmatic flavour. For the most part it appears to assume that ethical issues and dilemmas can and ought to be resolved by adult educators acting in their capacities as educators and that these issues and dilemmas are a necessary aspect of the practice of adult education. What is therefore needed if adult education is to be professionalised is to ensure that practitioners are encouraged to reflect on common practice-related dilemmas in the course of their initial and continuing education and training. In line with the professionalising project the book seems to be promoting a professional discourse on ethics grounded in instrumental rationality. Unlike Jarvis, most of the authors in this book draw mainly on the education and training literature, with few references to the wider body of philosophical and sociological writings dealing with ethics. In this respect it is more limited and lacks somewhat in depth in comparison with the more recent book. On the other hand Ralph Brockett's book provides a very much wider range of practical ideas and examples of issues and dilemmas to be used in stimulating greater awareness and

more informed decision-making on ethical issues confronting practitioners, and especially those working in or for educational institutions or large organisations.

Peter Jarvis is very much more ambivalent about any such professionalising project than Ralph Brockett and most of his co-authors. His central message may be interpreted as a cautionary tale. It sounds a note of warning against the dangers of putting one's faith in the kinds of modernism that underlie most forms of professionalisation, including in particular attempts to apply instrumental rationality to the task of solving ethical problems. On the other hand at times the book tends to engage in the very same professionalising project that it implicitly or explicitly rejects. Thus for example, the definition of education is an institutionalized one. In addition, despite its central commitment to personal relationships - presumably incorporating a view of relationships between educators and learners as equals - it seems at times to set educators apart from students or learners without embodying any of the egalitarianism underlying the notion of 'Sometimes teacher/Sometimes learner' (Somerville, 1980).

### **An existentialist approach to ethical issues in the education of adults**

As mentioned above, Peter Jarvis advocates an existentialist approach to ethical issues. He builds his argument by outlining and then rejecting a number of approaches or philosophical positions referred to in the literature. Thus he rejects 'deontological theories' which suggest that moral action should be based on 'the fulfilment of duty' or on 'obedience to a set of rules such as the ... Ten Commandments' (p. 19), as well as utilitarian theories which argue that moral judgements should be based on the rational analysis of consequences/outcomes or

likely consequences/outcomes of actions. In addition, he rejects those philosophies which are based on the belief that people know intuitively what is right and wrong, as well as those which suggest that ethical judgements are grounded in feelings and emotions and that the nature of human language itself does not permit us to make objective and rational ethical judgements. On the other hand, he also rejects Habermas' (1990; 1993) 'discourse ethics' and the notion that a universal rational consensus on moral and ethical judgements is possible through a process of communicative action in situations where rational dialogue is freed from distortions created by unequal relations of power.

What, then, does existentialism offer that is missing from the other approaches? What principles underpin the approach to ethical issues discussed in this book? In articulating his philosophy Peter Jarvis draws on such people as Martin Buber (1961; 1970), the Jewish existentialist theologian, philosopher and adult educator, Zygmunt Bauman (1992; 1993), the Polish emigrant who became Professor of Sociology at the University of Leeds, and Emmanuel Levinas (Hand, 1989), the Russian Jewish emigrant who became Professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris.

The central thesis of the existentialist philosophy as propounded in this book is that there is one, and only one, universal good or universal moral principle to guide all human actions. The heart of this principle lies in the existence of human relationships - in 'being concerned for the Other' (p. 15) or in 'caring for the Other' as a whole human being (p. 47). Both the social and the moral self grow out of and depend on personal relationships. Without relationships it is impossible to be fully human. To be a free person, it is necessary for the self to learn to care for the Other.

We *learn* to be moral agents. However this learning is pre-conscious: it is not primarily a cognitive endeavour. It is learned by the small child through the experience of being cared for. It does not depend on language and hence may be described as pre-knowledge. Although the universal moral good can be defended intellectually, it is not primarily cognitive and assuredly is not grounded in instrumental or technical rationality. It therefore cannot be codified or legislated for. By way of contrast with neo-liberal philosophies which privilege the rational, independent individualistic self; existentialism - with its focus on relationships, and in particular I-Thou or holistic relationships rather than I-it or instrumental relationships - privileges the social self.

There are other moral goods or values in society and many of these are highly significant. They include such things as the right to individual freedom and the promotion of 'a more democratic society' (p. 44), and they may be developed by means of education and training. However these moral goods or social and cultural values are not universal, except to the extent that they may contribute to the universal good of caring for the Other. In addition, there are, of course, non-moral goods which may also have social and cultural value. They include such things as efficiency, reliability, accountability, and the capacity to solve problems. However all such non-moral goods are relative to particular social conditions or cultural traditions and can only be judged ethically in the light of their contributions to the universal good.

Learning, the writer points out, is a natural process: it is amoral. It is also a social process and requires the presence of the Other. 'No human body born into a social

environment can avoid learning – it is the basic driving force through which the human essence emerges from the human existent. It is fundamental to Being itself and while there is Being ... there is the potential for learning' (p. 65). Education and training, on the other hand, are social institutions and embody and transmit social and cultural values. They may thus be understood to be advancing or promoting limited and relative social and cultural values. However education and training themselves do not necessarily embody or communicate universal moral value. 'Significantly, more knowledge does not make a better person ... (and) ... There is no logical connection between learning *per se* and behaving in a morally accepted manner' (p. 73). Indeed, in pointing to the potential violence and coercion in the relationship between teachers and students and to the dangers of teachers exercising arbitrary power, Jarvis draws on Bourdieu and Passeron who argue that all 'pedagogic action is ... objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p 78).

In spite of the dangers of symbolic and other forms of violence inherent in education and training, the writer argues that the processes of teaching, training, mentoring and assessment need not violate the autonomy or authenticity of persons. Indeed universal moral values may be found in education and training as well as in other situations whenever person-oriented relationships predominate. To accomplish this, however, educators need to go beyond pre-defined role-relationships based on differentials in knowledge, skill and power. Teaching, mentoring, and the assessment of students' work, for example, in this view, is '... about being with others in the learning situation and being available to them' (p. 87) and about inter-subjectivity and empathy (p. 153). Within this context the writer discusses the growth of distance



education. It is argued that a number of features of late modern and postmodern societies including the re-alignment of space-time and the increasing dominance of the market as well as changes in the mode of educational production underlie the expansion of distance education. However these same features, which serve to distance teachers from learners and diminish the possibilities of providing personal support, make it increasingly difficult to develop person-oriented relationships.

The writer argues that the task of respecting the autonomy and authenticity of persons and of constructing person-oriented relationships within education and training is becoming increasingly difficult in late modern society. He notes that there are 'two types of education – one oriented toward being and the other toward having'(p. 139), with increasing pressures on educators and students to give priority to the latter. This process involves the increasing commodification of knowledge. Education and qualifications are increasingly seen as market commodities, with a consequent narrowing of the curriculum and limited value being placed on those educational goals that focus on 'learning to be' and 'learning to be with others' (p. 141).

As noted earlier, the writer sounds a note of pessimism about the limits of rationality and about the contribution of education to the production of a moral or just society. He quotes Zygmunt Bauman (1993, p. 247) who argues that: 'Morality is not safe in the hands of reason ... Reason cannot help the moral self without depriving the self of what makes the self moral: that unfounded, non-rational, unarguable, no-excuses-given and non-calculable urge to stretch towards the other ...' Jarvis argues that, 'Morality ... lies beyond the sphere of reason. It is about desire and paradoxically, we

are faced with an almost unresolvable problem – the education of desire – since desire .. lies beyond the realm of education’ (p. 165). Those such as Ranson (1994) and Longworth & Davies (1996) who place their faith in the capacity of a learning society to deliver a new utopia, or in the capacity of education or adult education to produce a new moral and political order are bound to be disappointed. The writer notes that ‘the learning society is not necessarily a civilised society’ (p. 169), since learning itself is non-moral and can be undertaken for a multitude of purposes. Moreover it ‘... is not the cultural values of moral education that are required for a better world but ...(rather) ... the education, or cultivation(?) of (the) desire to produce a better world – a desire to practise the universal value’ (p. 170).

### **Strengths and limitations**

This book sets out to fill a gap in the literature of adult education. For some years I have been conscious of the need for a study which would examine in some depth the ethical underpinnings of adult learning and education and would thus complement the work done by Ralph Brockett and his colleagues. Moreover, in recent years, with the increasing divisions both globally and locally between rich and poor and massive and widespread social dislocation and fragmentation, as well as the increasing instrumentalism driving most forms of education for adults, it seems to me that the need for such a study has grown in urgency. For these reasons I welcome this book.

The central message of the book is, I believe, an immensely important one, and I find myself in agreement with much of Peter Jarvis’ philosophy. This is perhaps not surprising, since it seems that we have both been influenced by many of the same

philosophers, including in particular Martin Buber, whose work I first came across in the early-1960s. It may be of interest to note that in the New Zealand context probably the best-known protagonist of Buber's existentialism has been Lloyd Geering (1983).

In spite of these and other positive features, however, overall I found it a disappointing book. Sadly I think that it is unnecessarily difficult to read. There is a sense of breathless incomprehensibility about some sections, with sentences moving from one idea to the next in a series of qualifying phrases and clauses. For example a section which discusses 'practical knowledge' contains the following sentence: 'In everyday life people do not think about how they are going to behave, for a great deal of behaviour in social life has been habitualised, and then consciously decide which bit of philosophy and which bit of psychology, or ethics, etc, they are going to use in that situation, even though analysis of their actions might suggest that is what they do' (p. 10).

Adding to the difficulty is the book's lack of effective organisation. In several cases arguments and ideas are introduced and then dropped, only to be picked up and developed again in a later chapter. Moreover, throughout the book there are a large number of typographical errors, and there is considerable repetition. The most striking example of the latter that I noticed occurs in the discussion on postmodern theories of knowledge when a whole paragraph is repeated verbatim (pp. 72 & 122-3). All this points to a lack of integration which could so easily have been corrected by means of a thorough editing job. Had this been done I suspect that a much shorter and more readable book would have emerged.

Secondly, it seems to me that the discussion of a number of key concepts and ideas is somewhat limited. Concepts like ideology remain undefined, and I found the discussions of such concepts as freedom (p. 99), hegemony (p. 29), individualism (pp. 69-70 & 97-102) and power (pp. 29-30 & 77-87) highly unsatisfactory. Moreover there is no significant discussion of the ethical issues arising out of the ways in which class, gender and race have historically shaped our economic, political, social, cultural and educational policies and practices, both globally and locally.

Thirdly, many of the arguments and themes developed in the book lack depth and coherence. Thus for example the introductory discussion of the nature of education and educational knowledge, I found, to be quite limited in a number of respects, of which only two will be mentioned here. Firstly, the writer's argument or assertion that: '... there can be no education without some form of institutional provision .. ' (p. 7) seems to be very difficult to sustain in the light of considerable evidence of the importance of popular and community-based education and of the role of independent study in the lives of many people over the centuries. Secondly, the distinction which the writer draws between the concept of education which he argues is neutral and the practice of education which is not neutral (p. 7) is a highly problematic one. As the writer notes, Freire (1973a; 1973b; 1973c) is one of many educators to have argued that education cannot be neutral, and a similar stance is taken by Lawson (1979; 1982) and other liberal philosophers who claim that education is a normative and evaluative concept and by post-structuralists who would argue that the concept of education cannot be understood without locating it within a specific discourse. It is difficult to understand why the writer finds it

necessary to define education in these ways since it does not seem to advance the main argument of the book.

Further examples of arguments and ideas that need development include those concerning distance education (pp. 111-120) and learning and the market place of knowledge (pp. 121-133). The writer's discussion of distance education fails to take into account a number of important contemporary debates. For example, on the one hand, some would argue, seemingly in support of the writer, that since distance education is an 'expert system' and hence in many ways embodies 'universal strangerhood' (pp. 118-119), it is necessarily and inherently impersonal. In such distance education institutions therefore, in this view, it is necessarily very difficult if not impossible to foster I-Thou interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, others argue that the new digital technologies are beginning to make it possible to develop new 'convivial' forms of distance education which provide for new forms of dialogue and community, and for the promotion and support of interpersonal relationships, freed to an ever increasing extent from the constraints of space and time.

If the new technologies are to promote the kinds of relationships advocated in this book – or, more modestly, if they are not to act as barriers to the formation and maintenance of such relationships - it may be argued that it will, however, be necessary to remove control of distance education from the constraints imposed by the global market place and instead seek to locate it within civil society. This issue, however, is not addressed satisfactorily in this book.

Indeed, although relationships between the education and training of adults and the market economy are addressed at numerous points in the book, it seems to me that this discussion remains somewhat limited. At several points attention is drawn to the conflict between the requirements of the market economy and those of a society that gives priority to caring for the Other as a full human being, and the implications of this for the education and training of adults are discussed (pp. 39-41 & 121-133). In my view, however, this discussion is not taken far enough. The writer appears to take for granted the current form of the market economy under capitalism. He appears to be unaware of the political dimensions of the capitalist market economy and of the ways in which the market economy is shaped by the interests of specific groups in society and in particular by the demands of multi-national capital.

A consequence of this is that the writer also appears to be unaware of the political dimensions of education and training. This apparent lack of awareness of underlying structural forces and of the political struggles affecting developments in the political economy and education is reflected in the discussion of social justice (pp. 44-46) which takes as a primary focus the notion that we cannot achieve a better world through regulation. It is also reflected in the discussion of the education of adults and social movements (pp. 164-5) and the very limited discussion of radical traditions in the education of adults. It is worth noting that on page 102 of the book we are promised a later chapter on radical education. This however never materialises!

## **Conclusion**

What then can one say by way of conclusion? As indicated earlier, the book does contain some very important ideas. I believe that the notion that at the heart of ethical action lies concern for the Other and the development of I-Thou rather than I-It relationships, is of fundamental importance. Acceptance of this idea has major implications for the ways in which educators might act both as educators and as human beings. This book, and in particular perhaps the final chapter on the learning society and the education of desire, does a good job of examining some of these implications.

Despite this it seems to me that the book fails in two or three key respects. Firstly the varied quality of the writing is a major shortcoming which may well prevent many potential readers from coming to grips with the book's content. Secondly, the book largely fails to make the links between personal and social philosophies, between the ethics of interpersonal relations and the ethics of social policy and political action. In my view the book is too preoccupied with the professional and interpersonal dimensions of ethical action to pay sufficient attention to its political dimension.

In spite of his critique of individualism, ultimately it seems that the writer finds himself endorsing a form of individualism that is not incompatible with a neo-liberal position. This arises ultimately, I believe, out of the failure to bring together the insights and understandings of existentialism with those which may be drawn from various radical traditions. This gives rise in turn to the further failure to address satisfactorily some of the big ethical issues of our times. These include such issues as the growth of poverty, increasing inequalities, widespread social dislocation and fragmentation and increasing alienation referred to earlier in this essay, as well as questions about the

sustainability of life on this planet. I believe that these large questions give rise to some of the most important and urgent ethical issues facing all of us involved in adult learning and education as educators, as citizens and as human beings. A book on ethics for adult educators that fails to address these and other big issues has, in my view, done only half its job.

These then are some of my reservations. In spite of this, however, I found the book sufficiently stimulating and provocative to send me off to the library to pursue my own further reading in the field. Should other readers be similarly provoked or stimulated this in itself may well be one of the most important tributes that the writer of a book may receive.

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